

SCOTTISH BORDERS

Winter rations on the menu

Robert and Jac Neill run 300 Limousin cross cows on 435ha at Upper Nisbet in the Scottish Borders. Robert was *Farmers Weekly* Beef Farmer of the Year 2006

* Like many others, we have decided to draw a line under drilling winter wheat for this year, and it looks as though there are going to be a lot of spring cereals to sow.

We did manage to drill two fields of wheat that were grass leys that cattle had been grazing. They had muck spread on them and then drilled immediately behind the plough.

The cows and calves have all now been weaned and are settling down to their winter rations. The cows have been condition-scored and housed in different batches so that their feeding can be adjusted according to their condition.

This week they have all been blood tested and pregnancy diagnosed.

We were honoured to have been nominated to enter a new competition in Scotland, organised by Quality

Meet Scotland (QMS) and AgriScot: Scotch Beef Farm of the Year 2012. The results were announced at the AgriScot event held at Ingleston in November, and we were delighted to win this competition – especially when we were up against such strong fellow competitors.

The AgriScot event was a great success once again this year, with record attendance. How enjoyable it was to be able to walk around a show without our wellies on.

The following day we travelled to Stratford-upon-Avon to attend the Nuffield conference.

As well as the 2011 scholars presenting their reports, there was a presentation to the 2012 and 2013 scholars.

We met fellow scholars and their partners and have now found out more about what will be involved over the next two years.



NORTHERN IRELAND

Year has its highs and lows

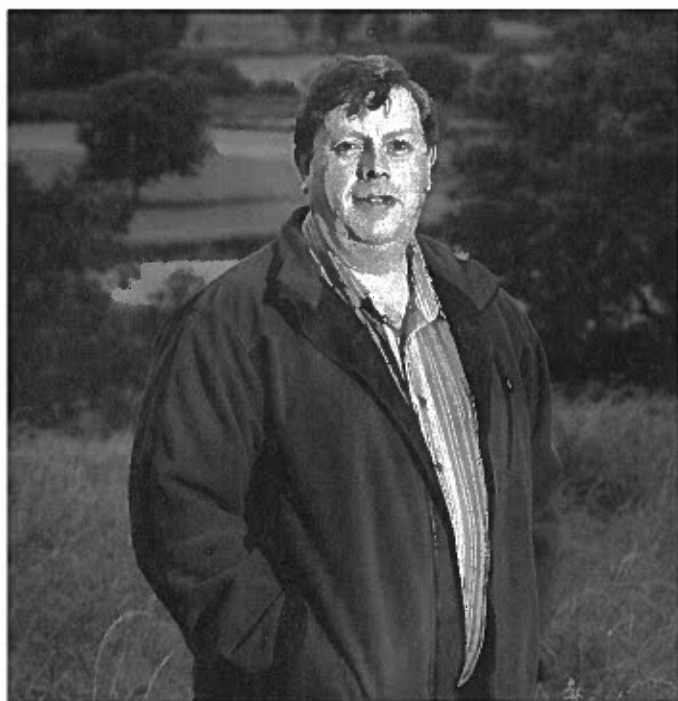
Andrew Burleigh runs a traditional butchers shop in south-west Fermanagh with his wife Rosalind and sons Alan and Lee. His brother and nephew run the mixed enterprise at the home farm

* A year to remember or a year to forget? January brought a new year of hopes that were shortlived as my brother Gus passed away at 54 years old after battling for 18 months with throat cancer. Then February and Stirling Bull Sales – they returned an overwhelming trade for all breeds.

The weather at the end of February and March was mild with great grass growth, and we turned stock out in the second week of March to save fodder.

But then came April and the unsavoury weather, resulting in the rehousing of all stock, and first-cut silage wasn't taken until the third week of May. June proved to be a trying month with wet ground conditions, but we hosted the World Charolais Congress at Stuart and David Bothwell's farm on a warm sunny day.

July brought much the same weather and full swing into local shows. At the H2 Championships



at Clogher, Alan won the junior bull section with a Bonjovi son. On 26 July we got our second cut wilted for a few hours and safely ensiled that evening.

We had to house all the cows and calves on 10 August because of ground conditions and a lack of grass. September came in with the same heavy rainfall and a long winter was looking us in the face. With the milk auction bringing a

much-needed rise in returns to just above 30ppl, October came in looking rosy for the dairy men.

November saw the Charolais sale returning good prices for the top-end bulls, which always find new homes.

On the shop front, in December orders are coming in thick and fast for turkeys and the usual festive meats. I always look forward to 5pm on Christmas Eve and a couple of days off.

CUMBRIA

China offers stark contrast

Robert Craig farms 440ha of all-grass dairy between two units in Cumbria. A passionate grassland farmer, Robert is a 2012 Nuffield scholar and former Cumbria NFU chairman

* As the halfway stage of my first five weeks of Nuffield travels approaches, I write in the warmth of a summer's day in North Island, New Zealand. Arriving in Auckland after a week in China highlighted the contrast between these two countries. China lived up to my expectations and, if I'm honest, the experience was almost shocking.

While I was expecting to see progressive change and rapid growth in China, the sheer scale of the recent investment throughout the country is amazing. It's clear to see where China's been using over half the world's cement powder during the past decade.

Following a few days in and around Beijing I took the bullet train south to Shanghai, travelling the 850 miles in under five hours, while occasionally peering down at clusters of farmworkers picking cotton by hand.



My visit to Beijing coincided with a major international food trade show. China FHC Expo, which was this year very well attended by Great Britain.

Our dairy co-op First Milk was present at the show as part of a Scottish trade visit and also had its own stand for the three-day event. Although it is early days and there's much hard work to do, the interest shown in the co-op's product range was very encouraging and by all accounts, the long journey looks like it's going to pay off very soon.

A dry, cold end to the spring here in New Zealand has restricted grass growth, and output across much of the country has dipped below last year's. Although it's now warming up here, the economics of feeding supplements are taking their toll and margins are looking very tight – sounds familiar. Follow me on Twitter @robertcraignfu

RICHMOND, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Prime lamb price down

John Bainbridge farms 1,400 sheep, plus followers, and 70 suckler cows on 600ha of rented MoD hill land and 21ha of family-owned land near Richmond, North Yorkshire, along with his sons Lance and Reuben

* The wet conditions have meant all my cattle are now inside. Some have gone away for their winter holidays while odd ones have been drafted out. Unfortunately this involved saying goodbye to a couple of pre-1996 cows that were very much part of the furniture, never any bother, and it was difficult to see them go.

The Christmas store cattle sale I attended at Bamard Castle lived up to its high standards. New buyers remarked on the consistency of good-quality cattle entering the ring, a credit to the endeavours of Teesdale farmers.

Before the sale I had some escapees that nearly didn't make it to the mart. It took a bit of patience, and a friendly cow to help coax them in, before I finally got them there. They were well sold, with some going as far away as Warwickshire.

Unlike beef prices, prime lamb trade is subdued and doesn't look like improving, especially with rumours of New Zealand lamb entering the country. My prices are about £15-20 down compared with this period last year, with horned wethers particularly difficult to sell. It's simply a case of shifting them before costs stack up too much.

Surprisingly, my wife Sheila returned from town recently with two lamb chops that worked out at about £19 a kilo. A far cry from the £1.30 a kilo average I received for lambs this past week.

Anyway it's best not to grumble too much, and with Christmas fast approaching I'll soon have a day's shopping to look forward to.



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